



Hai Ren, *The Middle Class in Neoliberal China: Governing Risk, Life-Building, and Themed Spaces*,

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addition, to identify the practical lessons for life that they attempt to restore and put into practice" (p. 18).

This rich material is carefully organised into three sections corresponding to the educational, religious, and political dimensions of the phenomenon being studied, and this tripartite division itself amounts to a clarification as it displaces the customary framework. The first section, comprising three chapters, deals with educational projects claiming to be based on "Confucianism." After a brief survey of the development of the role of education in Chinese society during the first half of the twentieth century, the authors expound on various attempts to re-institutionalise Confucian education in the early 2000s, from the "Confucian studies" and "national studies" projects in the universities to the movements for "children reading the classics" launched by the Taiwanese. To these they add the "traditional" education offered by private schools as an alternative to official education, as well as associations for cultural self-cultivation among adults. They also study the appropriation of similar projects by private firms and government bodies. Finally, the authors show how these different educational projects (particularly those outside university structures) contain an implicit anti-intellectualism that gives weight to "the people's" capacity to incorporate a traditional form of knowledge, rather than the theoretical studies of the elite.

The second section tackles the religious dimension of Confucianism, starting with individual case studies in the fourth chapter, which show how "conversion" to Confucianism comes about, and is narrated through lived experience in which Buddhist faith may sometimes play an intermediary role. The fifth and sixth chapters constitute a study of the "religious question" posed by the contemporary Confucian phenomenon: namely, why is it difficult to correlate its actual initiatives with the imported Western norms for classifying a "religion," and what are the terms used by its proponents to make their claim for the religious nature of their undertakings? Attempts at a religious institutionalisation of Confucianism in contemporary China, which form part of its ongoing history, are diverse and creative, as well as problematic. While projects aimed at restoring Confucianism as a "state religion" or a "civil religion" are still largely theoretical, some new religious movements (especially the *Yiguandao*) have already recycled Confucian elements among their fundamental tenets. Yet none of these attempts has gained legal recognition from the PRC state, and there is still a long way to go before reaching a consensus on the relationship between Confucianism and politics, or between Confucianism and other religions.

The four chapters comprising the third section begin by following the shifts in the cult of Confucius, from his "deritualisation" under Republican and Maoist rule to the return of the "sacrificial rites" in the reform period. This is followed by a detailed report on the development of the Festival of Confucius orchestrated in 2007 by the Chinese government, in which the authors draw attention to both official handiwork and initiatives deemed to arise from "popular" sources. In the first case, the aim is to make use of Confucius without any real respect for Confucianism, which reveals the continuing "Maoist *habitus*" or mind-set of political campaigning. The second set of initiatives embodies a historical ideal that goes far beyond the current political horizons by seeking to ground their legitimacy in recognition by the people. These two ways of restoring ritual are both mutually competitive and mutually supportive. The last chapter compares politico-religious rituals in Mainland China and Taiwan, and analyses the different possible ways of correlating the traditional cosmology with modern poli-

tics. This comparison allows the authors to give further consideration to the socio-political implications of pronouncements on the religious nature of Confucianism that they discussed in the second section.

Finally, in the epilogue the two authors throw light on recent developments in popular Confucianism in its quest for continuity and autonomy. They argue that the state, Buddhism, and the associations promoting syncretism are without a doubt the major external factors exerting pressure on the reshaping of the relationship between the Sage and the people.

Thanks to its richness and its detailed descriptions (supported by a large number of photos taken *in situ*), as well as the pertinence of its insightful and lucid analyses, this erudite but accessible work is invaluable for any reader concerned with the attitudes currently prevalent in the "Chinese world." In 2015 it was awarded the Bernheim Prize in the history of religions by the French Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres, and it sets a new benchmark and encouragement for the anthropological study of China as it faces the challenge of grasping the direction taken by the great traditions in an immense society undergoing transition. The authors' proposal for an "anthropological reflection on the present" (p. 400) will be an inspiration for historians of both Confucianism and Chinese religion in general, because there is no doubt that the "popular" movement and the relations between the state, the Sage, and the people studied in this work have long been present in the ancient traditions of China.

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The Middle Class in Neoliberal China: Governing Risk, Life-Building, and Themed Spaces,

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The Chinese middle classes – and the question of their definition – are a recurring subject of research. In recent years, many sociologists and anthropologists from all over the world have tackled this thorny question. These include, among others, Jean-Louis Rocca, to whom we owe translations of work on the subject by well-known Chinese scholars such as Li Chunling and Zhou Xiaohong,⁽¹⁾ as well as recent work by David Goodman.⁽²⁾

1. Jean-Louis Rocca (ed.), *La Société chinoise vue par ses sociologues. Migrations, villes, classes moyennes, drogue, sida* (Chinese Society as Seen by its Sociologists: Migration, Cities, Middle Classes, Drugs and AIDS), Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2008, 319 pp. (see Chapters 1, 4 and 5).
2. David S.G. Goodman & Minglu Chen (eds), *Middle Class China: Identity and Behaviour*, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd., 2013, 204 pp.; David S.G. Goodman, *Class in Contemporary China*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2014, 233 pp.

However, Professor Ren's book, published in 2013, offers an analytical perspective that is radically different from that of most existing work on the subject. The author does not seek to define and mark off the middle class by means of more or less arbitrary statistical categories, or through qualitative criteria such as consumption patterns, sense of belonging, and other lifestyle analyses.

Basing himself on the concept of the "device" (*dispositif*) developed by Michel Foucault – which is to say the complex of means, discourses, practices, techniques, and institutions used by a government for the purposes of control – the author analyses the "middle class" as a strategy of the Chinese state to promote a harmonious "middle class society," and to manage, educate, and control the Chinese population. To analyse this soft control, the anthropologist has carried out much field research, mainly in the Chinese Ethnic Culture Park in Beijing, in order to observe how an institution serving the state inculcates individuals with models of behaviour that correspond to the image of a middle class put forward by that state.

In order to demonstrate his point, Ren's book follows a simple and effective scheme. In his introduction, the author begins by defining Chinese society as a risk society in Ulrich Beck's meaning of the term, and refers back to several theories of social class that precede his own perspective. He then introduces the relevance of Michel Foucault's theory in analysing neoliberal forms of self-construction of individuals ("subjectification") in a risk society.

The first chapter is a presentation of the evolution of the Chinese state and its necessary changes in the face of upheavals linked both to the handover of Hong Kong and to the economic liberalisation of China. Indeed, since the composition of China's population has changed, the discourse of the state has also had to evolve in order to better represent this population politically. The author reviews the adaptations that the state has had to make in its discourse in order to integrate the new social classes, which were reviled during the Maoist era.

The next two chapters focus on the liberalisation in the field of culture through two institutions: ethnic museums and television. Initially totally controlled by the state, these two institutions, according to Ren, have been opened up to private management but continue to serve state ideology by presentation and programming that is closely monitored by CCP members. This "neoliberalisation" of institutions, nonetheless subject to strong state authority, has made it possible, according to the author, to mix consumer society with the education of the population through the field of entertainment and presentation, which he calls "image engineering," a term that could be defined as image engineering aimed at controlling the consumption patterns of individuals.

Chapter Four provides a more detailed analysis of the process of management and manipulation of individuals, on the basis of surveys conducted in the built environment of the Ethnic Park. Indeed, the park area is designed so that, through the presentation in space ("theming") and time of the culture of the various ethnic minorities, clients are placed in behavioural situations that are specific to a middle class (kinds of consumption, secure spaces, etc.). As Ren sees them, the norms and rules of the park shape consumers in order to make them into middle-class subjects.

The last two chapters, one on consumer photography practices and one on the backgrounds and social situations, whether precarious or not, of some individuals, serve to demonstrate that all members of society are affected by the discourse and techniques implemented by the state and cul-

tural enterprises, and all of them are constructed in relation to the middle class model being promoted.

Thus, Ren's perspective is very interesting. Although it is not a question of defining the criteria that make it possible to rank individuals among the middle class, one finds in his analysis factors usually put forward in the study of the middle classes: capitalist modes of consumption, the commodification of image and culture, and the analogy between the park and the secure area of gated communities that allows the author to classify the PRC among neoliberal societies. But the new perspective remains an analysis of the middle class as a manipulative image and a discourse that facilitates the stability of the social order. From this point of view, the middle class no longer includes only certain members of society who are eligible because of possessing certain criteria, but affects and influences the entire population. Although the author does not use the term, there is a renewed avenue of research for the study of aspirations and their impact on social relations between individuals.

However, Ren's demonstration is not always entirely convincing, especially in its lack of comparison with other situations of everyday life, that is to say, ones less "extraordinary" than a visit to the Ethnic Culture Park. Indeed, the objective set out by the anthropologist was to demonstrate that Chinese society is guided in all circumstances towards a new state ideological model, even by cultural enterprises released from state management, and is therefore potentially depoliticised. However, the focussing of his investigation on the Ethnic Park and museums necessarily distorts the results, because debates and political intentions cannot be absent from the issue of minority nationalities, which directly affect the unity of the country. What about situations in everyday life where the political is effectively absent?

In addition, there is sometimes a certain naivety on the part of the author in the face of consumers' willingness to integrate with the norms and regulations of the park when they are reprimanded by the guards for inappropriate behaviour. What happens once they come back out of the park enclosure? Ren seems to forget the ability of individuals, whether or not they are Chinese, to ignore the rules. Also, it seems to me that the anthropologist puts too much emphasis on the overdetermination of the control model he perceives, and places too much confidence in its effectiveness. It would have been necessary to follow these consumers at greater length outside of the extraordinary situation of the park in order to observe and prove the real embedding of a model.

■ Translated by Michael Black.

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